

UK: The evolution of Extinction Rebellion

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In its first year of existence, XR transformed the global conversation around the climate crisis. But then it was gripped by internal conflicts about its next steps. Can the movement reinvent itself for the post-pandemic world? By [Matthew Taylor](#)

In November 2017, Roger Hallam looked up from his cup of tea in a central London cafe and made a bold prediction. He had been walking me through the principles behind a new air pollution campaign he was organising, which involved small groups of activists blocking some of London's busiest junctions, when he paused, mid-sentence. "Of course, this is just small-scale stuff compared to what is coming," Hallam said. "The scale of the ecological crisis is a different thing. It is going to change everything."

The air pollution campaign, [Stop Killing Londoners](#), had yet to gain traction with politicians or the media, but Hallam didn't seem too concerned. He explained that it was partly being used to "road-test" civil disobedience tactics. "Within a year or so we will have thousands of people on the streets, blocking large parts of central London for days on end," he said. "Hundreds will be arrested and the government will be forced to sit down and tell the truth about the climate emergency."

It seemed fanciful at the time. Hallam, a charismatic, committed and sometimes divisive figure, was splitting his time between his organic farm in Wales and King's College London, where he was researching a PhD about political activism. Earlier that year, he had staged a hunger strike, which led King's College to [divest from fossil fuels](#). Despite this recent victory, and an air of certainty that would become familiar to those who dealt with him in the months to come, there was still little to suggest Hallam's predictions would come to pass – almost word for word – within 18 months. Nothing he had been involved in before had achieved the kind of impact that he was now prophesying. The movement that would carry out these protests, Extinction Rebellion (XR), didn't yet exist.

[Extinction Rebellion](#), which would be founded a few months later, was the brainchild of a small group of activists, academics and friends, including Hallam, and Gail Bradbrook, a similarly unorthodox environmentalist. The daughter of a coal miner from South Elmsall in Yorkshire, Bradbrook studied for a PhD in molecular biophysics before working on various social justice campaigns, such as tax justice and the Occupy movement. But by 2016, disillusioned by how little political progress these groups had made, Bradbrook came to the conclusion that she was missing vital information about how to bring about meaningful change. There was something else that nagged at her, too – an awareness of something deeper inside her "that needed addressing". (In conversation, Bradbrook moves easily between detailed analysis of the latest climate science and organisational theory to discussions of spirituality. She often holds prayer sessions before meetings.)

In March 2016, Bradbrook travelled to Costa Rica in search of enlightenment. There, in a story that has become part of XR lore, she took a series of powerful psychedelic drugs. "The most fucking terrifying thing I have done in my entire life," she told me later. "But I was willing to do it because I needed help." Before the hallucinogenic trip began, she offered up a prayer to be shown the "codes

for social change". Those words would have a key role to play in the emergence of XR.

A few months after she returned to the UK, Bradbrook met Hallam for the first time. Their initial conversation lasted four hours – Hallam complained that he had a headache by the end – as they discussed the unfolding environmental crisis, the inability of the current system to even recognise the oncoming chaos, and theories about how to transform politics. As Hallam stood up and prepared to leave, he half-jokingly told Bradbrook that the ideas he had laid out about how to transform society were the "codes" she needed. "The hairs on the back of my neck stood up," Bradbrook said later. "It was exactly the phrase I had used during my prayer in Costa Rica."

Over the coming months, Bradbrook and Hallam continued their conversations, along with a loose grouping of like-minded people, who eventually formed Rising Up, a network of activists committed to peaceful civil disobedience. It wasn't until April 2018 that, in Bradbrook's home on a hillside overlooking the Cotswold town of Stroud, the idea of Extinction Rebellion was born. At the "Stroud meeting", as it has become known, a core group of about 15 long-time campaigners, activists and academics decided that after years of small-scale political campaigns, about everything from fracking to migrant rights, they were, in Bradbrook's words, "ready to go for the 'big one'". As another of those present, Simon Bramwell, who was Bradbrook's partner at the time, [recalled later](#): "It was [then] that we decided to go for broke. We decided to throw all of our energy and intelligence at something that could change the planet."

But before such grand aims could be achieved, there were more mundane tasks. Agreeing on a name for the new group turned into a 25-step process that went on for weeks. "It was an absolute mission," said Clare Farrell, another XR co-founder, who has a background in sustainable fashion and design. When "Extinction Rebellion" was first suggested, Farrell recalled that "there was quite a bit of disquiet, because some people thought it was too harsh". But eventually it won.

According to Bradbrook, the group quickly realised it needed to appeal beyond what she called the "leftist echo chamber". The campaign would aim not only to tap into progressive concerns about social justice and equality, but also traditionally conservative themes such as national security and protecting family. XR's goals were boiled down to three demands of the government: to tell the truth about the climate and ecological emergency; to halt biodiversity loss and commit to net zero emissions by 2025; and to follow the lead of a citizen's assembly. A [presentation](#) titled Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It was developed, and quickly became known as "the talk". It starkly outlined the scale of the crisis and the dire consequences of inaction, as well as XR's belief that if enough ordinary people took to the streets for peaceful civil disobedience, then radical change was possible.

Then came the hard work of building a movement from scratch in just a few months. Farrell remembers that those early meetings had a different atmosphere to other campaigns she had been involved in: "It felt to me straight away like a group of people who were serious, who were very interested in how the system works and how to change it." She recalled the excitement of working with experts in so many different fields, from design to science, philosophy and politics. "It was the breadth of the collaboration that was really fundamental."

Hallam told me at the time that they did not want it to simply be an online phenomenon, which he feared could flare up and then disappear again just as quickly. Instead, XR needed people to go out into their own communities, explain, recruit – and then rebel. From the summer of 2018 onwards, volunteers began touring the country, giving "the talk" to people gathered in libraries and meeting halls, cafes and universities, pubs and churches. These meetings were sometimes tense affairs, as the scale of the climate crisis was laid out. But there was also a sense of relief among many of those present – that their fears about the crisis were being acknowledged, and that they were being told

there was something they could do.

On 31 October 2018, XR formally launched its campaign with a [Declaration of Rebellion](#) outside the Houses of Parliament. It had been billed as a small, symbolic act that would probably attract a couple of hundred people. In a taste of what was to come, more than 1,000 turned up and took a spontaneous decision to [occupy the road](#) outside parliament. The group's first big test came the following month, when it held a day-long demonstration aiming to [block five bridges](#) across the Thames in central London. On a beautiful winter's day, thousands turned out, blocking the bridges and bringing chaos to central London in the biggest act of peaceful civil disobedience seen in London for decades.

Five months later, in April 2019, came the protest that the group had been working towards since its foundation. Thousands of people occupied key sites across London for [almost two weeks](#). More than 1,000 were arrested for what were peaceful, respectful, sometimes joyful, protests. The arrests were a key part of XR's [strategy](#), which drew particular inspiration from the civil rights movements in the US and Gandhi's independence struggle in India. By encouraging as many protesters as possible to get themselves arrested, XR's plan – devised chiefly by Hallam – was to overwhelm the court system, with the aim of winning support and forcing change.

The protests turned XR into a movement of global significance, with scores of XR groups springing up in cities around the world, as well as in towns and cities across the UK. By the end, XR's representatives were sitting down for talks with senior politicians and ministers in the UK. Supporters and funders – many of whom had been sceptical before April – showered praise and money on the new movement, and in the weeks that followed, the UK parliament and scores of councils around the country [declared a climate emergency](#). XR had changed the conversation around the crisis. Now it had a big question to answer: what next?

Within XR there was elation about the success of April's rebellion, as well as exhaustion and uncertainty about the future. "A lot of these people had been involved in lots of would-be uprisings that they had hoped would take off but hadn't, so they were wary of pinning too much hope on this," said Daze Aghaji, a 20-year-old student and an early member of [XR Youth](#), the influential youth wing of the movement. "And then, when it did all come together, it was a bit like: 'Oh, OK – what do we do now?'"

Hundreds of new people had come forward to join the movement in the weeks after the April protests, many of them giving up their jobs to dedicate themselves to XR full-time. This influx boosted XR's organisational capacity, but also brought new ideas about what the group should be, and competing theories about how to achieve the change needed to tackle the climate crisis.

Among the key figures to emerge during the April rebellion was Farhana Yamin. Her experience – as a former UN lawyer who had helped draft the Paris agreement and worked on many of the key climate treaties of the past three decades – enhanced XR's credibility, and she became one of the group's most convincing public advocates. Over lunch at a north London cafe a few months later, she told me she had joined XR after becoming disillusioned with her world of diplomacy, thinktanks and policymakers. "I had been working with people who were not telling the truth about where we are, and are in a state of euphoric, egocentric denial," she told me. When she was asked to join XR, she agreed immediately. "I saw [coverage of] the October rebellion, when people laid down and got arrested and Greta was there, and I thought: yes, that is what we need, that is what I want to do. It looked beautiful."

Amid all the praise for XR's achievements up to that point, there had also been some significant criticism. From the left, some argued that XR's "beyond politics" framing fatally overlooked the role

that neoliberal capitalism, driven by the right, played in the ecological crisis – exploiting people and natural resources, particularly in the global south, for the benefit of a wealthy minority. There was also growing [criticism](#) from black and ethnic minority groups, who said XR's tactic of encouraging mass arrests ignored the reality of police racism, and effectively made the protests the preserve of privileged white people.

Meanwhile, from the right, critics branded those involved in Extinction Rebellion variously as middle-class layabouts or drug-addled hippies, dangerous killjoys or extremist anarchists. During the April 2019 protests, Daily Mail headlines described the group as a “radical far-Left eco-rabble” and detailed how “the Extinction Rebellion eco-mob plotted chaos in London from vegetarian café in leafy market town”. (XR's “critics have left no cliché unmolested,” wrote James Butler in the London Review of Books.)

After April, new recruits also had to be fitted into XR's decentralised structure, which includes an organising hub of “circles”, each with around a dozen or more individuals who focus on particular themes, from “actions” to “finance”, “legal support” to “regenerative culture”. On top of this, there are around 485 XR groups spread across more than 70 countries, with about 130 in the UK. There are also scores of affiliated groups based around shared identities, such as XR doctors, XR farmers or XR Muslims. People do not formally join XR, and there is no central membership list. Local groups can plan and carry out their own actions as long as they follow XR's [10 core principles and values](#), including a commitment to non-violence and focusing on systemic problems rather than “blaming and shaming” individuals.

Although XR's structure aims, as its website says, to build a “participatory, decentralised and inclusive” movement, some complain that it allows those with the loudest voices – often white, middle-class men – to dominate. Others complain of endless meetings, labyrinthine decision-making processes, and the sprawling network of [WhatsApp groups](#) the organisation has spawned.

According to Ronan McNern, a veteran of the Occupy movement and a key figure in XR's communications operations, the months after the April rebellion were dominated by internal wrangling. On one side were Hallam and his backers, who were pushing for an escalation in provocative direct action to keep the momentum going. They believed that a relatively small group of people, prepared to keep escalating their disruptive, peaceful, direct action could bring about systemic change quickly – especially if the elite in the country are in terminal decline, as Hallam regularly insisted. On the other side were people who argued the good will and moral high ground achieved in April should be used to build a broader movement, within the UK and internationally.

An increasingly important voice in those discussions was XR Youth, a semi-autonomous group that had been created at the start of 2019. “I felt pretty early on that as a young person I didn't really fit into main XR,” said Aghaji. “There was so much love of young people, but not in the right way. I would go to some things and everyone would be like, ‘Do social media! Kids love social media!’ I was like, this is so sweet, but it is not where we need to be.” Another founding member of XR Youth, Nils Agger, 26, who was also one of XR's original co-founders, agreed. “I had been feeling for a while that there was something missing, there were just not that many people my own age.”

From the start, XR Youth wanted to approach the climate crisis from a more international perspective, to highlight the role of activists in the global south, and to change the perception that this was a struggle for the future, rather than for the present. The message, said Aghaji, was “save ourselves” rather than “save our grandchildren”.

As the summer went on and internal disputes about XR's future grew more intense, the conflict came to a head over a proposed action to shut down Heathrow airport. Those in favour, including

Hallam, wanted to fly drones within the Heathrow exclusion zone in order to bring the airport to a standstill for days. For others in XR, this represented a counterproductive step-change in the level of civil disobedience. They warned that there could be serious safety concerns, and a real risk that the public goodwill built up in April would be lost.

Towards the end of July, after a series of gruelling discussions, events took an unexpected turn. During a key strategy meeting in Stroud attended by Hallam, Bradbrook and other leading figures, there was a sudden commotion at the door. Aghaji, Agger and half a dozen members of XR youth had turned up, unannounced. Bearing cinnamon rolls with We Love You written in icing on top, they occupied the meeting and read out their three demands, one of which was that the Heathrow plans should not go ahead.

“At first they were like: ‘What are you doing coming in here demanding things?’” recalled Aghaji. “But we were like: ‘This is literally what you have taught us to do.’” Agger said it was a strange feeling, as one of XR’s founders, to be occupying an XR meeting: “It was us trying to make some kind of intervention in the way XR was working. Heathrow was just the tip of the iceberg.” Another member of XR Youth made an emotional speech outlining their concerns. “It was very emotionally charged, and very teary,” Aghaji said. But, she added, “it was a turning point.”

A few days later, XR abandoned plans for the Heathrow protest and Bradbrook released [a statement](#) on behalf of XR, apologising for “failing to address adult privilege” within the group, and promising to “heal the division and hurts between us”. In early September, Hallam and a few others went on [to attempt](#) to close down Heathrow anyway, under the banner of a new organisation, Heathrow Pause. The protest, which had already drained so much of XR’s energy, fell flat. No planes were stopped or delayed. Several participants were arrested, including Hallam who, after breaching bail conditions by returning to the airport after his initial detention, was subsequently remanded in custody.

In the weeks following the Heathrow protests, hundreds of people who had been arrested during the April rebellion began to appear before the courts. Zoë Blackler, a journalist turned activist who oversaw the courts process for XR, said it was a reminder of what the movement was really about: “We were presented in the media throughout April as being a young persons’ movement, or a crusties’ movement, or a white middle-class movement, or whatever it was that that particular newspaper hated about us.” But to her, the hearings showed what those attacks had failed to acknowledge. “It was an extraordinary experience to be there having that many people come together and read out their statements about why they had done what they had done. It was very moving. People were crying, and it felt very much as if the judges were listening and responding to what they were hearing.” (Earlier this year, one judge said: “This is going to be my last Extinction Rebellion trial for a little while. I think they only allow us to do so many of these before our sympathies start to overwhelm us.”)

As XR headed towards its October Rebellion – labelled internally as the “difficult second album” – the euphoria of April had dissipated, but despite the splits and disputes, the movement had continued to grow, boasting hundreds of groups around the world. Less than 12 months after XR’s launch, many were confident that the October rebellion would repeat, or even outdo, its previous success.

One crucial reason XR had risen so far so fast was timing. In the decade before it was founded, the climate movement in the UK had been relatively quiet. Before 2008, a vibrant activist network – from Climate Camp, which saw protesters come together to carry out civil disobedience against major carbon emitters, to campaigns against the third runway at Heathrow and Kingsnorth power station – had forced the climate crisis up the agenda. And these social movements were at least partially responsible for progress at a political level. In 2008, the Labour government brought in the Climate

Change Act, the world's first long-term, legally binding framework for radically reducing emissions, which committed the UK to an 80% emission reduction by 2050. Among many activists, there was at least some hope that the political class was beginning to grasp the enormity of the challenge ahead.

But when the financial crisis hit in 2008, the focus of politics, and protest, changed, as opposition to austerity became the most urgent concern for campaigning groups – from Occupy to UK Uncut, the 2011 student protests to the [People's Assembly](#). Paolo Gerbaudo, an academic at King's College London who studies social movements and had been involved in environmental protests at the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, said that before the financial crash, the climate emergency felt like “the challenge of our time”, but afterwards, it had “largely slipped off the social and political agenda”.

The unfolding ecological crisis, however, had not been put on hold. During the 2010s, evidence of climate breakdown – rising temperatures, melting ice, failing harvests – continued to mount. As the scientific warnings grew ever more dire, there was a deepening feeling among those who were paying attention that traditional environmental campaigning was failing, and that politicians were not delivering – with potentially catastrophic consequences. It was into this context that XR emerged.

In the Autumn of 2018, just as XR launched, UN scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published an unusually [stark report](#), which warned world leaders that we had only 12 years to make radical changes and avoid the most devastating effects of the climate crisis. According to Blackler, the new movement managed to tap into this feeling of frustration and fear by acknowledging the scale of the crisis, and persuading people that collectively they had the power to change things. “We gave people something they could come along to and plug into really easily,” she said. XR's message was simple: civil disobedience could actually get results. “People suddenly understood that although a few million on a march would achieve nothing, if you could get a comparatively small number to do civil disobedience, you can effect change much, much faster.”

As XR's October 2019 rebellion approached, the scientific warnings were becoming, if anything, more dire. The [school strike movement](#), led by Greta Thunberg, had mobilised hundreds of thousands of young people around the world, and public figures such as [David Attenborough](#) and Pope Francis were lining up to sound the alarm on the climate and ecological emergency. Everything seemed primed for a repeat of April's success.

In reality, it proved impossible to recreate the surprise and novelty that defined the earlier protests. Although XR held more sites in October and said it had more people arrested – 1,837, compared with 1,138 in April – the protests failed to catch the public's imagination in the same way. Actions that would have been headline news just six months earlier – such as hundreds of breastfeeding mothers [closing down](#) Google HQ – were now seen as par for the course by the media. Other factors also counted against XR. The weather was colder, and the days shorter. Police tactics were harsher and the UK was in the midst of Brexit convulsions.

XR was also criticised for tactical missteps. Early in the morning of 17 October, a number of protesters climbed on top of a tube train at Canning Town station in order to disrupt rush-hour services. Commuters reacted with anger, and scuffles broke out, with one protester being dragged from the roof of the train. The incident only lasted a few minutes, but the footage, which was widely shared, was damaging for XR, and highlighted some of the challenges facing the movement. How do you control what actions go ahead in a decentralised structure? Did the decision to carry out the protest highlight the lack of class and racial diversity within XR? Those [who had decided](#) to go ahead with the action did not seem to realise that by targeting the tube at that time of day, the people affected would not be bankers or financiers, but working-class Londoners, many on zero-hours

contracts. Many observers also expressed bewilderment at the fact that climate protesters had chosen to target public transport at all.

The UK general election, which took place a couple of months later, was another flashpoint within XR. The Labour party offered a raft of policies to rapidly decarbonise the economy and invest in sustainable, well-paid, unionised jobs: its so-called [green industrial revolution](#). For many people concerned about the climate crisis, this was a cause worth rallying behind. But during the election campaign, XR – to the dismay of both Labour party activists and some inside the movement – did not mobilise behind Labour’s climate offer, preferring instead to target all three main parties with [hunger strike](#) and people dressed in bee costumes under the slogan “[Bee-yond politics](#)”. One irate XR figure called me to express her dismay at the group targeting Labour in the run-up to the election. “There are some of us who have been in meetings all day really trying to stop this,” she said. “It is crazy, depressing, but we lost. It is going ahead.”

The clash came down to two competing ideas about XR’s ultimate purpose. For some, it was a vehicle to transform the political landscape, making it possible for existing institutions to put forward radical environmental policies. For others, the existing structures were incapable of overseeing the transition needed, and had to be overhauled and replaced. Reflecting on these tensions earlier in the year, one insider told me that XR had reached a point where the founders needed to take a step back: “It is the classic startup or founder syndrome, where an organisation reaches a point where the founders need to let go and let something else emerge.”

At the start of 2020, following Labour’s general election defeat and the relative letdown of its most recent rebellion, XR found itself at a crossroads. “There was concern about the direction of travel, about how well we have managed to decentralise,” Bradbrook told me. “People [were] getting cross with each other and finger-pointing.”

In February, XR released a new [strategy document](#) that appeared to move away from occupying and holding sites for days on end, instead emphasising targeted civil disobedience in cities around the country. Plans were announced for a rolling rebellion that would take place in London in May, “targeting the underlying causes of the climate and ecological emergency – government, media and finance”.

Just a few weeks later, as the coronavirus pandemic began sweeping across the UK, the prospect of mass demonstrations receded and XR’s plans had to be put on hold. The group’s finances had been in a parlous state since October, and they had been hoping for an influx of donations during the May demonstrations. When they were cancelled, XR was forced to scale back its headquarters in London and stop all living allowance payments that had previously supported volunteers in need.

The crisis also had a profound impact on the movement in other ways, according to Blackler. “There was a certain point when I remember thinking, ‘Everyone in the country is thinking about their own mortality all the time’, and it was such a strange moment,” she said. “But that is what we need people to be doing – to be thinking about these big, existential issues and the mortality of our world.”

For many environmentalists, the political response to the devastating pandemic had redrawn the boundaries of the possible. Things that they had repeatedly been told were naive or impossible – such as shutting down swathes of the global economy overnight, and trillion-dollar investment packages – were suddenly happening. Last year, when XR unveiled its demand for zero carbon by 2025, it was widely criticised as unrealistic. Now, such demands seemed less outlandish. “The [Overton window](#) has been smashed wide open,” Bradbrook told me.

Over the summer, this sense of political possibility grew, as Black Lives Matter protests exploded around the world and millions of people took to the streets to demand fundamental changes to policing and the end of structural racism. According to Blackler, the crises of 2020 have “underscored the fact that climate change, structural inequality and racism all have the same root, and that is our global financial system”. The protests also refocused attention on the existing criticism of XR from black and ethnic minority groups. On 1 July, XR put out [a statement](#) apologising for its previous mistakes: “We recognise now that our tactic of arrest has made it easier for people of privilege to participate and that our behaviours and attitudes fed into the system of white supremacy. We’re sorry this recognition comes so late.”

The BLM protests had created space for XR to have “really hard but crucial conversations”, said Aghaji. “It is a time of maturing. XR fucks up so often because we became way too big too quickly, and none of us foresaw that happening. Now, especially with Covid-19, we have had time to look at ourselves.”

In July, XR announced [plans](#) for its next rebellion, which will begin on 1 September, when activists plan to peacefully disrupt parliament until the government agrees to debate the group’s three demands. In its statement, XR identified “an intersection of global crises” including climate breakdown, Covid-19, racial injustice and economic inequality as “symptoms of a toxic economic system propped up by corrupt politicians that is driving us to extinction”. Aghaji saw the statement as further proof that XR was learning to “play team sports”. She said there were ongoing conversations between XR and “multiple movements”, and was optimistic about what those new relationships would create during September’s rebellion.

A few weeks later, in a sign that perhaps a more consensual approach was gaining the upper hand in XR, the group announced that Hallam – whom Bradbrook had [previously described](#) as XR’s “biggest asset and worst liability” – no longer had a formal role with the group. In a statement [posted](#) to Facebook on 28 July, Hallam stated that he would be devoting himself to a “new direct action organisation/anti-political party”, Beyond Politics. “I believe immediate high level direct action is a right and duty of all citizens to bring down this genocidal government and those liberal institutions which passively stand by as the greatest crime in human history is taking place,” he wrote. Earlier that month, Beyond Politics had targeted the headquarters of several NGOs including Greenpeace and Amnesty, pouring paint over walls and floors and handing over letters demanding they write to their members, urging them to “rise up against the government”. Meanwhile, XR groups have continued to stage smaller protests, including opposition to HS2 and a demonstration at the [British Grand Prix on 2 August](#) during which four protesters were arrested.

Speaking at the beginning of the year, back at her home in Stroud where XR was launched, Bradbrook was reluctant to speculate about the future. “There is just arrogance in even having an opinion,” she said. But after a pause, she began to imagine a couple of scenarios: one dystopian, one utopian. In the first, humanity destroys itself, “and perhaps the universe learns something from that”. In the second, a truly global citizens’ assembly is established, humanity reunites, and we “use the sort of energy that has previously been used in a war to go into a rapid healing situation. It is all possible.”

She paused again, before adding: “I can’t think of anything else I would rather do with my life. It is such an honour to try. What else can we all do?”

Matthew Taylor

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